

Crypto-Christianity in Yugoslavia during Communism

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Religious persecution is a term used while describing attempts to demographically erase one religious' community from certain geographical area. Persecution can be physically violent, especially during wars. It can also be freedom-taking when one ends up in prison for his religious believes. There are subtle ways of making psychological pressure on aimed community. All these were common practice in the past.

In communist Yugoslavia there wasn't mass public persecution like in USSR but rather a silent one. People working in state offices or companies, police, teachers and all personal working with children and youth weren't allowed to publicly express their religion. Consequence of not doing so was great possibility of losing their job. There wasn't specific law or rule for this but it was common practice. Religious symbols such as crosses (usually worn around neck) or rosaries weren't desirable. Attendance of Sunday Mass was public expression of religion, and it wasn't good to be seen on those events. Christmas, Easter and other religious holidays were regular working days. People wouldn't be executed, arrested or imprisoned for not following one of above »unwritten rules« but it was socially unacceptable and undesirable for state and media propaganda. Boundaries of religious freedom in Yugoslavia are not widely accepted in scholar and other circles. From time to time there are public discussion »what was and what wasn't allowed« during that period. All arguments are based on individual experience. Relations of Vatican and Yugoslav authorities gradually changed so the boundaries of religious expressions had been widened and tightened dependable on complications between two states.

Communists wanted to push out celebration of religious holidays by replacing them with their own. That is the reason they pointed out New Year as a holiday in which Santa Clause (*Djed Mraz*) brings gifts to children. There was even New Year's tree that was decorated same way as Christmas tree. Religion was ideological rival to socialist secularism. Catholic church was strong opponent of Communism since the 19th century. Yugoslav partisans gained antagonism

against priests during the World War II. because some of them gave support to Ustashas. After the establishment of new Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia one of the loudest critics of new government were bishops and priests. Reason for this lies in bitterness caused by confiscation of Church property, murders of priests and suffocation of religious freedom. Church lost property, power, influence and wealth in Yugoslavia. It is often said that in those times Church was closer to ordinary people than ever.

Official Church also made some wrong moves which have worsened situation. Pope Pius XII issued »Decree against Communism« on 1. July 1949. It was specified that anyone who was a member of Communist party or favour it was forbidden to admit to sacraments. This decree excommunicated *de iure* many Yugoslavian Catholics and has them driven away from Church. In Istria, in late 1940s some priests forbid Communists to be Godfathers and Godmothers at Confirmations. These weren't deliberate moves from Catholic church since they disrupted already weak relations with Communist governments. Church acts made Catholics choose between their faith and political ideology.

Throughout history when there is a persecution going on, aimed public matter becomes private and secret. Christians who were practicing their faith hidden from the eyes of public were called crypto-Christians. When we are talking about crypto-Christianity there should be drawn clear difference between secret and semi-secret performance. Difference is in a number of people involved and a time of ceremony. Completely secret performance of the sacrament includes presence of priest and people who are obligating to be there so the sacrament would be valid. In case of baptism it is child and godfather. During wedding obligating is presence of bride, groom and two witnesses. Performance is held during night hours. Semi-secret is when there are present people which are not obligating for the validity of the sacrament.

Crypto-Christianity during Communism mainly consisted of secretly performing certain Catholic sacraments. People who would secretly do the sacraments weren't regular on Sunday Mass because this was something you couldn't hide. First communion and confirmation are also public sacraments which are impossible to be kept secret because they are being done in front of large number of people. So, secrecy was possible only during baptisms and weddings. Most famous ex-crypto-Christian in Russia is today's president Vladimir Putin. He was head of Communist secret police KGB so this makes it even more interesting. His story is typical for that age: »When I was a few months old, my mum and her neighbour in the communal apartment where we lived took me to church without telling my father, he was a Communist Party member, and baptised me«.

USSR secretary who started democratization of the country, Gorbachov, was also secretly baptised but not by a priest. It was his grandmother who performed the ritual. If highly ranked members of party were baptised, we can only

imagine how many ordinary and low-ranked communist were secret Christians. Slovenian born Melania Trump, USA president's wife, was also baptised in secret in her homeland. Her father was a member of Communist Party and gave her baptised in Raka, birth town of her mother even though they were living in Sevnica. She is the most famous secret Catholic from ex-Yugoslavia.

It's quite interesting phenomena of *woman's hand* and initiative in secret baptisms. It was usually mother or grandmother who would take the child to the priest. Women were guardians of faith in these hard times. Men were more likely to adopt atheism. Their disagreement with religion is revealed in testimonies that their wives had hidden baptism of their children from them.

Communists and their sympathizers sometimes wanted to show their ideological support by giving their own children ideologized names such as Sovjetka, Sutjeska, Titovka and others. Before Stalin-Tito split up even Russian names such as Volga, Nadežda, Sibirka were popular. Croatian onomastics in two decades after the World War II. was very untraditional. It's symptomatic that those names weren't Christian. In those days it was usual that child gets another Christian name on his baptism. This name was often chosen by priest rather than parents. Today Catholic priests in Croatia discourage parents in giving different name on baptism than the one in official documents.

Beside social discomfort and state discouragement parents who wanted to baptise their child had to overcome another obstacle placed by Church. Canon 868 §1 states that:

»For an infant to be baptised licitly the parents or at least one of them or the person who legitimately takes their place must consent; there must be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion; if such hope is altogether lacking, the baptism is to be delayed according to the prescripts of particular law after the parents have been advised about the reason.«

This was often bypassed by the priests during Communism era. Christian baptism during Communism was specific because there wasn't a secular replacement for this act. Church marriages on the other hand had their replacement in civil marriages. The religious couple would marry twice. Civil marriage was being concluded in state office and religious one in Church the same day. But it could also be done in Church some other time. It was important not to marry in Church before office ceremony because it was punishable by fine. It's interesting that this paragraph about the punishment remained in democratic and religiously free Croatia until 1998. New family law is active since 2003. and allows priests of Catholic Church, Orthodox, Muslim Community and some other religious communities to conclude lawful marriages.

Church marriage discipline wasn't loosened up in Yugoslavia during hard times. As a result of this many believers in mixed atheist-Catholic marriages were suspended from some sacraments. If someone is not canonically married, he is under suspension and can't have absolution of sins in confession. Church's

point of view is that person which is not canonically married is living in unlawful community and is active adulterer. He or she is living persistently in a sin so priest can't give them absolution because there is no repentance. This person also can't receive communion. These days pope Francis is clearly trying to give new direction in Church practice. He advocates new approach to these couples. Few years ago, he personally baptised child whose parents weren't canonically married.

Religious funerals during Communism era had special approach because secrecy wasn't manageable. There isn't known case of secret funeral because there could be only one laying of the coffin in grave. So, in these final goodbyes to loved ones, family had to decide to do it with or without a priest. Some publicly non-religious family would invite a priest and tell to wider society that it was »deceased one's final wish«. This would soften usually harsh judgment of ambiance.

Crypto-Christianity in Croatia during Communism era is not yet researched. There are two ways research could be done. First is browsing through church books of baptisms and weddings during communist era. This way researcher could primarily get statistical data like percentage of secret weddings among public ones. Question that rises today is: Can secretly performed sacraments be recognized in Church books decades after their performance? Answer is positive and there are several ways of doing this. Great amount of time, more than year, between birth and baptism is an indicator that child was baptised in secret. If church books mention one person, as the godfather of baptised children, suspiciously great number of times (serial godfather) then this person was some kind of church helper and these baptisms were performed secretly. Canonical status of marriage of children's parents is also an indicator of secret baptism. If they are not canonically married it would be written in baptism record that their child is illegitimate. Sometimes parish priest would write that parents were in civil marriage and proclaim child legitimate. Indicator for secret weddings is also serial witness on multiple weddings as well as strange time of wedding usually in late night hours.

The second way of researching is collecting personal testimonies and writing oral history. This way could be lightened up circumstances of the performance and crucial facts about involved persons and other details. By examining testimonies researcher could test hypothesis that sacraments were performed secretly only by the ones who could lose their jobs because of public expression of religiosity. Both methods of research could be possible only on local level because research on national level would be very difficult and would demand lot of time.

Post-war period especially 1960s and 1970s were years of rising secularization of European societies and fall of religiosity which hasn't been stopped to our times. It is hard to tell in which measure active religiosity visible through

Mass attendance was low as a result of trend which was going on in Western world and in which measure as a result of Communist pressure and promotion of atheism. It is expected that highest number of semi-secret baptisms were performed in late 1980s and early 1990s when religiosity wasn't taboo anymore. Moreover, it became socially desirable to have some sacraments. Years later it was said that some ex-communists thought that baptism record would replace Communist party member card. But that thesis has shown to be wrong. Religiosity in modern Croatia was never a key factor for professional development in state or private sector. However, baptism, first communion, confirmation and church weddings became a social standard needed to be fully integrated in society. Regular Mass attendance and expression of religiosity is not part of social pressure.

Renewal of Catholicism in Croatia in first half of 1990s was expression of national identification with formula *Catholic equals Croat* and anti-communist feelings expressed with *communist equals atheist* rather than sincere religious conversion. Today there is no need for secrecy of religious (dis)beliefs. Personal view of God's existence, no longer affects lives of people in Croatia. These days it is a land of equal opportunities for everyone.